

**Kym Paton: *Time Will Break the World*
Enjoy Gallery, Wellington, 4 – 21 December**



Taking its title from an eerie song by the US alt-country band the Silver Jews, the latest exhibition at Enjoy is disturbing and absurd in equal parts. Wellington artist Kym Paton has carefully constructed a room within a room, or a gallery within the gallery.

White walls, extending from floor to ceiling, mimic the dimensions and conventions – right down to the scotia and skirting – of Enjoy’s L-shaped gallery space. They fill the room until there is almost no room left, just a 600mm corridor between the artwork and the gallery’s “real” walls, only wide enough for one person to walk down, or two to shuffle sideways past each other – at the exhibition opening most of the patrons escaped through a window and partied outside on the balcony.

Creating a situation where the spectator is forced into a special relationship with the artwork is one of many Minimalist strategies the artist plays with. Paton has created a space of which she says “You can’t get an overview, you can’t stand back” - the work forces you to be involved. It gave me the feeling of being a rat in a maze, or a character in one of those sci-fi movies where everyone is out of scale with their surroundings.

The use of monumental scale, everyday non-art materials, and the activation of negative and positive spaces are further references to a minimalist tradition where the emphasis shifts from the visual (elicited by ornamental surfaces, or smaller-than-human scale objects) to the experiential, from contemplation to situation. The site-specific nature of this work, its faithful mimicry of the host gallery speaks of a concern to address the institutional and social context of the work. For instance, the distance between the installation walls and the gallery wall is equal to the distance that separates the traditional public gallery visitor from the art works. In this artist run space, the implication is, art is made accessible, unavoidable – “You know you’re soaking in it.”

Kym Paton, *Time Will Break the World*, Enjoy PAG, 2003

A further site specific reference, although not as immediate, and perhaps not intended by the artist, is one that echoes British artist Rachel Whiteread’s *House* (1992), a concrete cast of the interior of a condemned council house. Whiteread’s public protest at the destructive impact of contemporary urban planning gained a high profile after the sculpture was in its turn demolished, the anti-monument lasting just a few weeks beyond the destruction of the surrounding neighbourhood. Enjoy itself resides in a neighbourhood of diverse and historical houses and shops that are threatened with demolition by the local city council and Transit New Zealand to make way for a motorway, a pollution-making, resource-wasting, ostensibly time-saving civic project.

Paton, in her turn, insists that she wanted to make something “ridiculous and Big”, to disturb as well as amuse. The unexpected humour of her work tugs it away from a pure (re)staging of minimalist theatre, and/or social and artworld critique. Squeezing along her cramped corridors is an experience both claustrophobic and oddly hilarious, as strangers are forced into close encounters of an absurd kind.

The artist seems to have erected this dysfunctional architecture to mimic the heavy pressure time places on us, our lives and our communities. At the same time, we sense the artificiality and pointlessness of that pressure. It is a liberating form of confinement. I am glad I have had the chance to experience the installation before it is dismantled, perhaps to be recycled in the inventive way this artist has recycled minimalist forms and ideas.

Readymade Museums

Imaginary Museum and Practice

**Adam Art Gallery Te Pataka Toi, Victoria University, Wellington,
31 May – 29 June 2003**

'Now everything becomes clear, the house images move in both directions: they are in us as much as we are in them.'

– Gaston Bachelard, *Poetics of Space*

'Whether Mr Mutt with his own hands made the fountain or not has no importance. He CHOSE it. He took an ordinary article of life, placed it so that its useful significance disappeared under the new title and point of view – created a new thought for that object.'

– Marcel Duchamp, *The Blind Man*

The two exhibitions occupying Wellington's Adam Art Gallery through June 2003 were a welcome and brave event, made up as they were of work which did not immediately provide much purchase for the viewer. It was the relationships forged between physical, visual and psychological spaces that left lasting impressions, and rewarded the time spent in the gallery.

This review documents my experience of walking through the shows during their installation. Readers can visit Clegg's work on line at <http://www.imaginarymuseum.com> and the Practice catalogue, with reproductions of the artists' work and a curatorial essay, is available from the Adam Art Gallery (contact Kate.Griffin@vuw.ac.nz).

Imaginary Museum David Clegg

David Clegg's ethereal audio-visual installation, *Imaginary Museum*, colonises the top floor of the Adam Art Gallery while *Practice*, a group show curated by Charlotte Huddleston of Enjoy Gallery (the first in the Adam's *Re:refresh* series of shows by emerging curators), fills the rest of the space with quirky (re)collected artefacts which slouch around the walls and floor. Passing through the two in succession feels like moving from a formal lecture theatre to a boys' high school classroom.

Rushing in from finding a car park, by the time I have taken ten paces into the cavernous gallery I am hushed and slowed by the quiet, Spartan space. I look around for the art, which is not immediately apparent. My attention is caught by a wire emerging from a rectangular hole in a steel plate on the black tiled floor. The wire leads from the hole to a CD player and headset, sitting mutely on a black and chrome gallery chair. I look up to the row of white sheets of A4 paper, stapled to the wall just below eye level. A series of digital photographs bisect the paper in horizontal bands, in the same neutral colour scheme as the floors, walls and wires of the Adam Gallery. The images depict lots of metal and glass and floor tiles. They could represent the gallery we are in, except for

the German signage on the windows and entrances.

Another wire snakes out from behind the gallery's front desk and down into another (man)hole, which also accepts computer cords. More digital printouts hang above the wire, showing neutral blank walls, doorways. Initially the images look whole, depicting continuous walls, logical joins. On closer examination a doubling becomes apparent and you can see that all the images are split down the middle – some images are exact doubles of each other, some are taken from different points of view.

Turning away from the front desk I face the row of images stapled to the opposite wall. The floor abutting the wall is actually a metal grille platform, which you need to stand on in order to look closely at the work. One of the images in the series shows a ceiling/floor architectural feature similar to the one I am standing on. It is the image within the series which stands out, with its starkly contrasting black reinforcing grid. The picture has us looking up through the grid at ghostly shadowy shapes, silhouettes of people standing on their floor, our ceiling.

There is an uncanny moment when I look down through the grid I am standing on, catching a glimpse of the ground floor 10 metres below me, and realise my position mimics that of the ghosts in the image. I experience an 'I AM' encounter, relating to the image in the photograph before looking up at the vast empty space above Clegg's work where McCahon's big *I AM* once hung.

That vertiginous moment, standing on the grille, ushers in the Real, the flip side of the Imaginary, in the form of a memory of a visit to an architect friend's house. Baby in arms, investigating a mezzanine feature, I stepped out onto a net, into nothingness. I screamed as I felt I was going to plunge with my baby two floors down. For a moment I am split between the remembered scream and the present contemplative calm.

Some images evoke a 'film noir' sense of imminent or embedded threat, particularly the hall/corridor shots – a confined, prescribed, possibly inescapable passageway, sandwiched between more open-ended spaces. Other images are pale, over exposed – ethereal and 'heavenly'.

In its quiet, unassuming way this installation implicates or draws in *everything* about its surroundings. The public art institution's architectural austerity and conventions are activated, and become part of the work – as interesting as the artist-placed objects themselves. (Which bit is the 'work?' This installation presents the possibility that the gallery is the work as much as the photographic images, the stylish CD players. Separating one from the other would be like trying to separate the back of a piece of paper from the front.)



Finally I get to the last CD station and feel the (guilty? dutiful?) compulsion to listen – the CD players sit so passively on the chairs, and do not necessarily look related to the work on display. The tape is filled with people discussing the furniture in the (depicted) museum/s. The disembodied voices discuss the practicalities of experiencing the space while consuming or viewing art, and the way the furniture relates to the art. ...‘designer materials, valued for their comfort for visitors, to have a rest ... neutral design’. They identify themselves in relation to other (Imaginary?) museums: ‘used in other museums’... ‘becoming a museum chair’... ‘don’t want to *pronounce* the furniture’... ‘not like the Tate Modern with its funky furniture.’

Voices corresponding to the series of images installed down the stairs at the Adam Gallery caution that it is ‘better to have a ground plan, or map with you to always know where you are, in which part of the building’ because ‘people can be confused, even as a professional it’s annoying not to know your way around.’

The labyrinthine character of the imagined spaces constructed by the audio-visual installation reminds me of a gothic fairy tale, but staged in a clean, white ‘rational’ space. The labyrinthine design of (modernist) museums has been identified as a reconstruction of the path to enlightenment – nirvana being the autonomous state achieved in the presence of Great Art in a white room – transcending the complexity and wilfulness of the everyday world. The (modernist) trajectory is derailed in this instance as the voices often drift off, as if in confusion at the inability of words to explain the spaces to the interviewer. There

David Clegg, *Imaginary Museum* (2003) detail, Adam Art Gallery, Wellington.

is a sense that although they are trying (or someone has tried) to present a cohesive explanation and experience of the space, in fact the fragmentary is the more apparent.

The title of this show, ‘The Imaginary Museum’, indicates that it could be read as an imaginary place in the sense of Sleeping Beauty’s castle, and indeed in his artist’s statement Clegg presents the museum as a dematerialised, subjective space, ‘the museum you have constructed inside your head’. However, it also began to feel to me like I was moving around in some life-sized Lacanian Imaginary – that part of the three registers of subjectivity (the Imaginary, the Symbolic and the Real) that make up our behaviour and sense of identity; who we think we are. The Imaginary is the order of visual, spatial and bodily experience and communication. At the heart of the Imaginary is the body ego – our sense of bodily reliability and unity. Buildings can act as ‘surrogate bodies for us to identify with in order to fortify our sense of self’ in the face of otherness (Bracher). Inhabiting physical, visual and spatial environments ‘literally or imaginatively’, we take a position in relation to others: either ‘you are me’ or ‘either you or me’ (Wright). Wandering through the environment Clegg’s installation (re)creates in a New Zealand gallery, there is an illusion of unity, of sameness (is it an illusion?). I almost feel like a European in camouflage – and wonder, do I feel in competition with this (reflected) space, or strangely at home?

At some point in your walk through the work, the similarities between the photographs of foreign spaces and the space in which you stand trigger a sense of déjà vu. Characterised by an uncanny sense of familiarity, déjà vu exists in the mind of the viewer only, normally an intensely and even disconcertingly individual experience, where one's own sense of wonder and 'recognition' ('Oh, I've been here before! This has happened before!') cannot be shared with others. In this installation déjà vu becomes a shared experience, a communal one (or it could be, although often you are the only one in the museum). The possibility of intimacy within this impersonal space is forged at the level of subjective memory 'lapses', provoked through the visual register in this work.

At the heart of Clegg's project, it seems to me, lies a challenge to the projection of the museum as a house of knowledge – just as we cannot know our selves with concrete certainty, formed as we are through a series of illusory relationships between ourselves and our image (reflected) in others.

If the top storey houses the Imaginary museum, the other floors are home to a series of *imaginary objects* – objects which seemed at one time to be part of oneself.

Practice

Tao Wells, Patrick Pound, John Abbate, David Simpkin, Richard Lewer. Curated by Charlotte Huddleston

Found photographs, hastily drafted posters and documents, shonky plinths, surrealist sculptures and a huge wall drawing are some of the artworks that reach up the walls, or crawl along the lower floors of the gallery. For once I love that the artists are all male while the ones providing the Symbolic order, the conceptual and administrative framework, are female – the museum director and the curator (and, in this case at least, the reviewer). It seems consistent with the flipping and teasing of orders happening in this building at this time.

There is a game of perception where two images are embedded in one – either two profiles facing each other, or a vase. The trick is, you can not see both images at once, and also, once you have seen an image in the shape, you can no longer read it as an abstract shape – it has content and meaning. When I read 'Practice' for instance, the name of the group show curated by Charlotte Huddleston, I can see it as either: '... makes perfect', or as referring to the artists' professional activity. It implies either a process towards perfection or an overview, a looking back. I cannot read it as both things at once.

This continues in the work. There is a doubling which is activated by the place the art is housed, so that a collection of familiar, often overlooked objects transmogrifies into Art Object, whoops, and back. The dynamic play between signifiers cannot be held still and you are drawn into a game of tag – and these guys are tag-teaming. Through the readymade, The artist becomes a manipulator of signs, more than a producer of art objects, the viewer an active reader of messages...' (Foster).

While it has been argued that Assisted Readymades (is any readymade ever unassisted?) take the object

into the aesthetic realm, shifting it away from its 'meta-argument about the role of the museum in determining what art is' (Butler) I think they do more than the backing-off that Butler's argument implies. I think they work more in the uncanny register than the aesthetic – they become Surrealist, and rather than engaging in Dada's tug of war with what art is, or isn't, they enter the even more contested territory of 'what is' or 'isn't'.

Right from the start, and perhaps most obviously, ontological and perceptual questions are posed. But is this the most engaging aspect of the show? What else is going on?

Tao Wells' 2 *Class hours* take place in a cold, darkened space, humming with air conditioning – like a fridge. A spine of objects lie on the floor down the central axis of the gallery – at the far end wall, large digital clock figures count backwards in real time from 2:00:00:00. A list of rules is taped to the wall opposite the entrance: 'List titles of what I'd like to see make it exist (in 2 hours), Present all together, Add new names to list'. This instruction appears to have been carried out.

The first object along the prone axis is a piece of A3 white paper with 5/30/03, maybe the date the artist installed the work. The American way of writing the date displaces me to '9/11', which I always misread as 9th September (I know it's September, so I ignore '11th', and read '9th' as the day's date), and pass from there to further associations of 'otherness' and misunderstanding, 'us' and 'them'.

More 'teaching resources' include: *Driftwood*, a roughly made child's chair, like an old-fashioned school room chair, a transparent sandwich-board with sheets of A2 newsprint 'I'll push your trolley for \$10'. Another sign: 'HER PANTS COST \$110'.

Hand-written posters perpetrate urban art myths: 'A FRIEND OF ROB CHERRY'S STOPPED A TRAIN FOR A PISS', and, 'P. ROBINSON AND J. FRASER HAD TO BUNK UP, WHILE TRADE EXEC'S SPENT UP'. A hint of Chinese whispers and Freudian slips emerge in the lost letters: 'I SAW TONY DE LA TOUR BEING PICKED UP IN A HUGE LACK MER ED S'.

These fanzine moments are offset by the artist's 'real world' artefacts (no Mercedes for this dole bludger) and woven in with his fantasy moment: 'Mr Avant-garde NZ 2003'. Recognition! Affirmation! Wells' 'photocopy of Michael Parekowhai's 'I AM HE' references a male lineage of the Word, from McCahon, to Michael P, to his own plaintive: "I AM WHO?" Wells has compiled, like a mission statement, master signifiers of the art world and collapsed them in a heap on the floor.

The anti-aesthetic or 'slacker' aesthetic, as well as the didactic diatribe which operates as the axis (or collapsed axle) of his practice installation, situates Wells' work in a tradition of museum critique, from Duchamp to Daniel Buren and so on. The question always arises: why critique the museum from within its embrace? Are you not caught in a compromised position? Douglas Crimp takes up the question in defending Buren against this charge. He argues that

'if Buren's work had not appeared in the museum, if it had not taken the museum as its point of



Tao Wells, *2 Class Hours* (2003), Adam Art Gallery, Wellington.

departure and as its referent, the ... issues [of the political nature of the radicalism of Minimal and conceptual art and its aim to discredit the forms and institutions of dominant bourgeois culture] would not have arisen. It is fundamental to Buren's work that it function in complicity with those very institutions it seeks to make visible as the necessary conditions of the artwork's intelligibility.' (Crimp)

Hmmm. That might be true in Buren's case, where his Situationist group were consistently and avowedly Marxist in their critique of what museum institutions represent and support. But what are we to make of Wells' vow to be held liable for 'all of the world's problems'? A legal document (is it?) asserts that 'I Tao Wells solemnly declare that I take unlimited liability for all of the world's problems'. It is such an empty gesture – a posture. And that, I think, is the point. He presents Knowledge as Imaginary (as Clegg does his/our museum). Knowledge becomes an illusory object of desire which teases us with its (unfulfilled) promise to stem the floods of anxiety about separation and loss. Paradoxically, his work is tightly wedded to the site via a strategy of disavowal – a sort of love-hate relationship.

Leaving Well's dark room for developing artists, I walk out to the balcony where John Abbate's presentation unravels in a different way. It begins with a set of beautifully rendered, realistic charcoal drawings (fragments of a filing cabinet), and moves on to six wastepaper baskets each containing a manila folder, binned tidily. However the 'office' gradually becomes undone or disordered as two gallery chairs, mounted on the wall almost within arm's reach of the mezzanine balcony but dauntingly high off the floor, present a vertiginous place, impossible to occupy. Is

this a comment on the difficulty of conceptual art to get 'bums on seats', or maybe a critique of conformist approaches to art making, presenting, and viewing?

Looking past the empty chairs my attention is caught by Richard Lewer's wall drawing taking up the far wall of the long narrow gallery stretching out below the balcony. Enticed down the stairs, I first have to negotiate David Simpkin's sign posts with odd words: 'All day Grit your grammar and mingle' and sometimes times and dates: 10am – 1pm Fri, sitting on strange objects. These pieces had me thinking of the Surrealist game, *Exquisite Corpse*. It is as if the artist has made these objects through some random process of selection, and they sort of come together in the end. They resonated again for me, on stepping out of the gallery, when street signs suddenly hummed with surrealist potential.

Around the corner from Simpkin's sign posts, I came across Patrick Pound's range of found (or refound) objects. The act of collection and recollection in Pound's work struck me as a more creepy type of taxonomy, or categorising – plundering strangers' lives, lifting intimate moments and (re)placing them in a seamless collision with others'. 'Girlfriends' for example showed old snapshots of young women in a variety of settings, some of whom reappear in 'The Photographers', faded shots of people holding cameras (reminiscent of old knitting pattern books, populated with Brady bunch families). These once innocuous snapshots become like missing persons' records – the absence of identity is eerie.

Eerie in a different way is 'The Names': a flock of

badges in shapes of girl's names, pinned to the wall like a butterfly collection, casting shadows. They remind me of the chewed gum sculptures/objects of Hannah Wilke, which she moulded with her mouth into vulva-like badges which she stuck to her body.

Of all the artists' work, the rubric of the fetish is most apparent in Pound's. According to Freud, the male fetish is an object which stands for something else: the woman's body, specifically the genitals, gateway to the First Home. Lost and found, collecting and (re)collecting – this work leaks longing from every pore. (In the absence of any women artists' practice in the gallery at this time, I'm tempted to (mis)read the missing figure as that of Woman, haunting the gallery as a disembodied voice, a trophy-like nametag, a fashion magazine cut-out, a nameless, bikini clad object in a found photograph.)

This compulsion to revisit, to return to the scene of the crime also infiltrates Richard Lewer's work. His wall drawing, 'You can't always get what you want' represents the gallery wall from floor to ceiling as a perforated peg board, on which is inscribed a 1960s suburban house, a child's face, splattered with graphite marks, and a graphite ghost dog, rubbed out, looking over the house. Shadows, cracks and cavities are drawn around periphery of the scene as if edges are eroding. A real rifle is tucked away in an adjacent corner, discreetly tethered to the wall (by the gallery? just in case?).

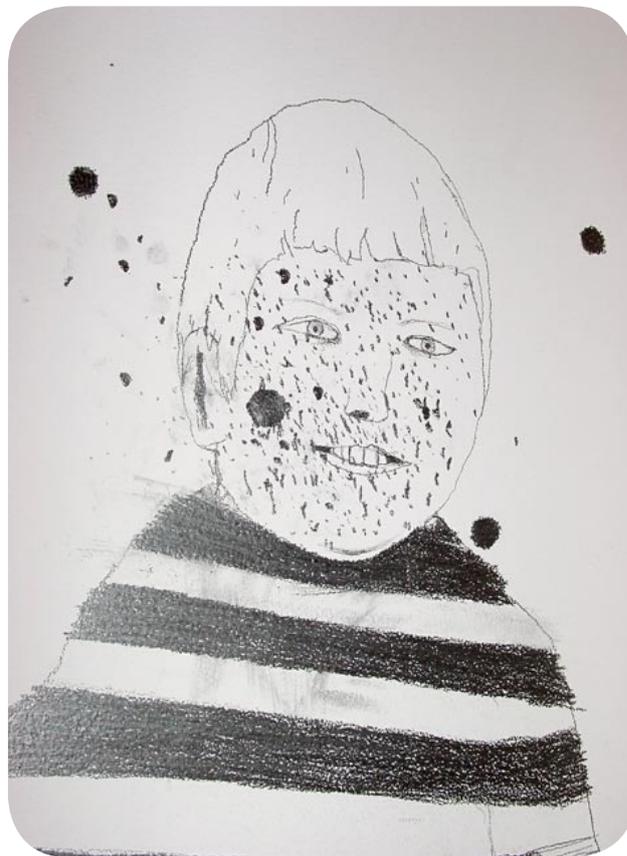
The drawing slips between trompe l'oeil and mimetic perspectival space. But not a fixed space – we seem to be looking down at a scene also, a park bench with two people sitting on it, and adjacent chair blacked out – another vertiginous viewpoint. Are we now the ghost dog? Actually, this image becomes more disturbing the longer you look at it. At first, I just enjoyed the fact that there was some drawing in the gallery, before reading the story. But the unease mounts as the signs all point to something quite yukky taking place out of frame.

In some ways it is this domestic disturbance which binds the show/s. Carol Duncan characterises the (modernist) museum as a ritualistic space, the building as a labyrinthine female body through which (male) supplicants wend their way to eventual transcendental enlightenment. Reading this work through the mode of fetish and collection/recollection, and the dynamic of repetition compulsion that haunts the Surrealist uncanny, the sense of Lost Boys is inescapable to me.

The trip to the Adam Art Gallery was like being a sightseer wandering down Memory Lane. I found myself constructing maps of other people's intimate spaces. The map became the thing I took away with me – fleshed out, the way maps are, by my own engagement with the territory.

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